Jon Hall and Subjective Wellbeing part 2 - full post

Posted on 19 October 2011

In part 1, I talked about how Jon explained subjective wellbeing and the different ways of looking at it. In this part, I'll look at some of the reasons why Jon believes we need to measure subjective wellbeing. (We'll put up a link on this blog to the whole presentation, once it becomes available).

Jon said that subjective wellbeing matters because it can drive objective wellbeing (the argument for looking at both is that objective measures identify the determinants of subjective wellbeing). And he gave a very interesting example of a study conducted on a group of nuns. The study looked at how happy the nuns were when they first joined the convent and how long they lived. One reason why nuns are good test subjects is that they have chosen to leave mainstream society and live very similar lives to each other. This can reduce the number of factors which might influence the results.

The study determined the happiness of the nuns when they joined the convent by looking at the applications they wrote about why they wanted to become a nun. The more positive the words and sentiment that were in the application, the happier the nuns were assumed to be. The study then looked at how long the nuns in the happiest quartile lived compared with those in the least happy quartile. Around 90% of those in the happiest quartile survived to the age of 85 compared with 34% of those in the least happy quartile. Also, over half (54%) of those in the happiest quartile survived to the age of 94 compared with 11% of those in the least happy quartile.

However, there can be other reasons apart from happiness that might have contributed to the long life of the nuns - genetics, for example. But why happiness might be important is because being happy can have social benefits for people. Jon said that happiness can increase social connections which is known to play a role in health.

Another reason Jon gave on why subjective wellbeing matters is that looking at public policy through a subjective wellbeing lens can generate new ideas. If we approach problems from an angle of trying to maximise wellbeing and happiness, we can come up with very different solutions and some countries like Bhutan (famous for its Gross National Happiness) are going down this path.

One very important thing to note is that Jon does not say that subjective measures should replace more objective measures but that subjective measures should be looked at alongside objective measures. In part 3, I'll explain why.

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